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ABSTRACT

This article presents typical high school counseling problems--lack of space, insufficient materials, and lack of access to existing materials. It then describes how one school solved these problems by creating a modern counseling center. Details for setting up such a center are provided, including location and design, materials (self-awareness, career awareness, college and training programs, financial aid, test preparation), programs and public relations. A sample floor plan is presented, as well as many practical suggestions for program implementation. An evaluative survey administered before and after this counseling center was begun shows satisfying increases in student awareness, participation, and depth of counseling. (BP)

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SEPTEMBER 1976

The GUIDANCE CLINIC

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GUIDANCE SERVICES

THE MODERN COUNSELING CENTER: A NECESSITY

by Joseph Dickert

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Each year the parents of youngsters in public and private schools pump enormous funds into educational programs designed to prepare their children for the challenges of life. One of the most important functions of education is to assist young people in making life decisions. On the secondary level, the decisions to be made are serious and difficult. They pertain to the choosing of future careers and the selection of post-high school educational institutions or training programs that will prepare students for these careers.

It is basically the student who must make decisions (with input from counselors and from parents who foot the bills). But how can students make realistic choices unless a substantial bank of research materials is avail-

able to them, unless there is a facility large enough to house both the information and the students using it, and unless there are well-designed programs and an informed staff to assist them?

What about the situation in your school? Does one of the following apply?

- Outside the counselors' offices there is a small anteroom with a secretary or two and very little room left to store the wealth of fine materials available on the market.
- Inside each counselor's office there are a number of basic handbooks, catalogs, and other valuable reference books; but due to your appointment schedule, these reference materials are not conveniently accessible to your students.
- A good supply of counseling materials is maintained in the library. No counselor, however, is responsible for keeping them current or for ordering new materials when published. Since the library is at a distance from your office you rarely use these resources and, for the most part, neither do many of your students.

If any of this is true then the following may also be characteristic of your system:

- Lack of sufficient and current resource materials for both students and counselors.
- Lack of qualified personnel to assist students in learning to use these research materials with some degree of independence.
- Lack of a facility large enough for group orientation and group dissemination of information and instructions.
- Constant repetition of basic information in individual counseling sessions.
- Lack of depth in individual counseling sessions because students have not accomplished their own preliminary research.

There Is a Better Way

Secondary counselors are certainly convinced that their functions are equal in importance to those provided in the classrooms, laboratories, library, and athletic areas. Unless administrators and the school board can also be convinced of the value of the potential programs you could offer with increased budgeting, neither you nor your students will ever benefit from the advantages of a modern Counseling Center. Perhaps outlining the success of our Center will help get things moving in your school.

Four years ago we were suffering from "all of the above" deficiencies of the traditional system. Fortunately, both our administration and school board were concerned about the need for career education. Our presentation of goals, objectives, and activities for this project was detailed and sound—of crucial importance in any campaign for approval and funding. In the end we obtained more than a Careers Center. We created a complete, modern Counseling Center.

Preliminary investigation: Before attempting to design our Center, I first visited several existing centers and a demonstrational resource materials facility sponsored by our State Department of Education. This enabled me to identify assets and defects and to make plans with some kind of experiential knowledge. I wrote preliminary and final proposals for Title III funding, which were approved. Although funds were depleted when our project came up on the agenda, happily our school board bailed us out, subsidizing the entire proposal.

We were able to locate and obtain a large room suitable for our purposes, though in some ways not the ideal. The ideal seems possible only when a new school is being built. Compromises are required in the adaptation of existing structures, but at least compromises are becoming increasingly more possible as enrollments decline and as common walls can be removed between classrooms.

Our Center is one and a half times the size of a normal classroom. It is carpeted, attractively furnished, air conditioned, and it seats thirty students. It is replete with all kinds of the latest resource materials and is well staffed by two counselor-secretaries and a most important paraprofessional. It has large storage areas and a room for duplicating materials.

The Center is a beehive of activity. It is highly visible, well known to our students, a clearinghouse for many counseling services, and is used by a satisfying number of students. (Our Center might have remained relatively unused, however, if programs had not been designed to channel students through it. More about this later.)

Location and Design

Ideally, the Counseling Center should be centrally located. One compromise you should not make is that your Center be at a distance from your existing counseling offices. If the possibility of securing or creating a large room near your offices does not exist, it would be better for you to establish new offices near your new Center and convert your existing offices to some other purpose. This is crucial.

Size is very important. Our Center is already becoming too small for an enrollment of 1400 students as we add new materials each year. You should consider that your Center will also be used for class-size group sessions and by students who wish to meet with college and career representatives.

Avoid dead space. Wall-to-wall windows are a detriment, as are too many doors. Every square inch of wall space is needed for shelving, tables for audio-visual materials, carrels, and display areas.

If possible, a side room should be designed and used for typing, duplicating, and all but brief phone calls.

minimum. Sound conditioning is important.

In the ideal design, the student work area (tables and chairs) should be in the center of the room. Surrounding this area on all sides should be resource materials. At least one secretary-receptionist (nontyping) and a paraprofessional should be available at all times. Counselors' offices should be within a few steps of the Center.

There are many possible "ideal" designs. In my sample design shown in Figure 1, a single doorway rather than many doors provides entry for counselors to the Center. High windows and careful placement of doors maximizes available wall space.

Adequate bulletin board space is very important, but the boards should not be cluttered. Make sure that information is displayed in categories clearly defined by titles, boundaries, or color-coded backgrounds. State colleges, private colleges, two-year colleges, scholarships, testing information, college and career speakers for each week, important announcements, current job opportunities, job market data, special training schools, apprenticeship programs—all of these should be publicized. But again, students should always know exactly where to look on the bulletin board for the information they need. Cluttering and changing areas only leads to confusion. Racks for take-home literature are also very helpful.

The design in Figure 1 for a Counseling Center in a new school of approximately 1500 students, while ideal, cannot possibly be implemented as a conversion plan in most existing buildings. The model does, however, provide ideas as to what factors are important in design. Your task is to establish design priorities, identify possible alternative areas in your building, be creative, and be convincing.

Materials

It is highly important that a modern Counseling Center be meaningful not only to the college-bound students but also to those students directly entering the job market. Materials in your Center, therefore, should be selected to cover the following topics.

Self-awareness: Who am I? What are my values and priorities? What are my abilities, talents, interests? What do I want in life? What is realistic for me? There are many excellent brochures and audio-visuals you might purchase for use in group counseling sessions. Here is an excellent area for values clarification leading to in-depth counseling sessions on a small group or individual basis. Perhaps your testing program should be amplified to offer students greater understanding of their personalities.

Career awareness: Students need an overview of the world of work. It is important that they understand how jobs fall into categories or clusters. Several cluster arrangements should be available to them through a bulletin board or display area. Also needed are a multi-games offering information concerning specific careers. Such literature is of value only if it is kept current and covers most of the following topics: job descriptions, required high school courses, required future education or training; places offering employment, expected income, working conditions, advantages and disadvantages, related jobs, and future job outlooks.

Besides the well-known reference materials available on the market, our ultimate and most detailed arsenal of information is a four-tiered side file which utilizes D.O.T. numbers supplemented by an alphabetical cross-reference. It is virtually impossible for a student to ask about a job for which we do not have information. If this does happen, we know where to write for information.

Colleges and training programs: Once students have made a tentative career selection, they need information concerning the educational institutions or training programs that will prepare them for specific careers. Materials needed relate to four-year and two-year college catalogs, general college handbooks, guides to college majors, special training schools, apprenticeship programs, on-the-job training, military opportunities, and jobs available to high school graduates or drop-outs.

Financial aid: Any counseling center should contain not only basic information and forms related to financial aid, but also an extensive file covering individual scholarship opportunities publicized by colleges and other organizations.

How to prepare for tests: We have a complete array of manuals on how to prepare for the GED, PSAT, SAT, ACT, AT, CLEP, AP, entrance exams for nursing schools, medical and dental schools, and lay schools. For our staff, we have manuals on Miller's Analogies and the GRE's.

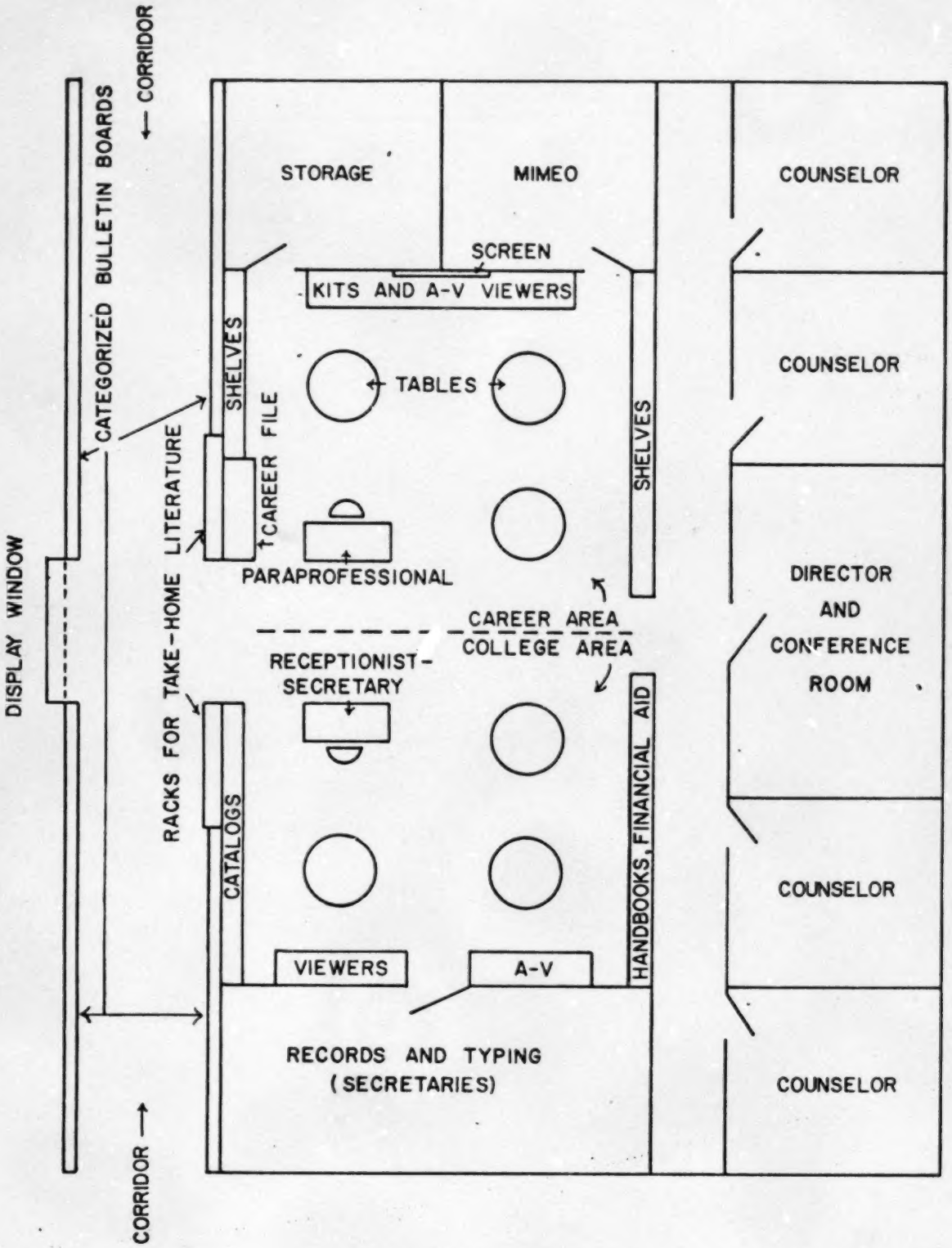
The best way to find out what materials are available and relevant is to visit other schools and to investigate good bookstores. Eventually you will make the mailing lists and receive more literature on materials than you will know what to do with.

Programs

Without carefully designed and well-implemented programs, the finest Counseling Center will not be used by most students. Programs get students into the Center. Programs guarantee that more students will, in fact, engage in meaningful research.

In our school we rely heavily on *group* dispensal of information. It is less repetitious, more efficient, and advantageous with respect to the amount of basic information that can be transmitted within a given period of time. More ground can be covered in forty minutes with groups of students than can be covered in 350 ten-minute individual sessions. The presentation of group sessions in our Center affords counselors the opportunity to point out directly key reference mate-

Figure 1: SAMPLE DESIGN



follows:

Tenth grade: orientation to the senior high school; interpretation of ability, aptitude, and career interest tests; orientation to the careers section of our Center; the assignment of a career research project.

Eleventh grade: interpretation of further testing results; explanation of the significance of class rank, involvement in activities, and the development of a well-rounded personality; discussion of the relevance of such development to success in college and/or later life; orientation to the future education or training section of the Center; assignment of future education or training research projects.

Twelfth grade: explanation of procedures for application to colleges, training schools, apprenticeship programs, military programs, financial aid, scholarship opportunities, and immediate job placement opportunities.

All grade levels: Career Day and College Night presentations.

The various programs designed for each grade level not only are carefully prepared verbally, but are amply supplemented by printed instructions, bibliographies, and assistance by counselors and our paraprofessional. We are definitely and visibly carrying our programs to the students through group presentations. Beyond this, every attempt is made to contact individually those students who are not responding because they fail to comprehend or appreciate the "why's and wherefore's." Undoubtedly these students still present the major challenge to you and to us. Our experience is that the number of such uncomprehending students is declining each year.

To afford maximal use of our Center and to prevent overcrowding, we time projects and deadlines in such a way that each grade level is predominantly using the Center for one-third of the year. Our present schedule favors the following sequence:

- September to November – twelfth grade
- December to February – tenth grade
- March to May – eleventh grade

How do we arrange to see our groups? Through the cooperation of teachers in several departments who have come to realize the importance of our programs and who are willing to release students from their classes for a period or so to help us reach our goals. Without the understanding and support of these teachers, our programs could not possibly succeed.

Staffing: Because counselors are for the most part tied to their offices, it is essential that a paraprofessional be continually available in the Center to assist students who come to do research at times when counselors are not available. Our paraprofessional and secretary-at-large also work together to arrange for college and career opportunities, get out announcements, and secure volunteer assistance from interested students and parents.

We also have secretaries who handle the clerical aspects of college applications, scheduling, report cards, duplicating, correspondence, tutoring, job opportunities, and so on.

Public Relations

PR frequently smacks of the insincerity and self-serving tactics associated with various enterprises. Yet, understood as a genuine effort to keep parents informed and to generate in them the same enthusiasm we feel for our Counseling Center and our programs, PR is essential. Without good public relations, the services we identify as being necessary for a superior counseling program might never get launched or, if floating, might be damaged or scuttled through lack of appreciation by those who control the budget.

Students, parents, teachers, administrators, the school board, and the taxpayers should clearly know your goals, needs, and reasons. All too often counselors work hard and service students very well without parental recognition. Because of student propensity to leave information in lockers or because of a possible lack of communication at home, many parents are unaware of the concern, effort, and programs offered by the counselors.

Our Center and its programs have been well publicized through the local newspaper, parent luncheons, visitors, and especially our new Counselor Newsletter. This regularly published bulletin reaches every home. It alerts parents to what is going on in various areas of the counseling process. Parents have expressed their appreciation of the information communicated to them through the Newsletter. Through this medium we feel our administrators and school board also receive assurance that their investments in counseling are yielding meaningful human profits.

Evaluation

It was foreseen that some sort of pre-post measuring instrument might verify the hoped-for impact of our Center on the student body. A survey was designed. It was administered to the class of seniors who graduated prior to the opening of our Center and to two subsequent senior classes, which had been exposed to the offerings of the Center. Senior perceptions of counseling services were quantified and reflected substantially higher ratings each year.

Several outcomes of our system have become apparent to us:

- Increased concern on the part of our students to obtain necessary information.

- Increased sophistication in our students regarding the mechanics of self-directed research.
- Increased knowledge on the part of our students as to course selection, college requirements, college testing requirements, application deadlines, financial aid, information sources, and so on.
- Greater depth in individual counseling sessions.

We have also noticed that the time saved by group dissemination of instructions and individual student research affords counselors the opportunity to become more knowledgeable and helpful about colleges and career options.

The classroom: Although our Center offers a fine career education program, I believe we still shall not fulfill our potential until we succeed in getting career education into the classroom.

Traditionally, teachers are believers in education for education's sake. No one wishes to deny the cultural value of education. Still, with a declining population growth, rising unemployment, college graduates unable to find job placement in areas for which they were trained, and the possibility that this economic situation may be more than a temporary trend, it behooves the teachers to keep one eye on the future job market and to be aware of viable careers for which their subject matter will prepare their students.

Students are more pragmatic these days. They are likely to be better motivated to study if they see a relationship between course content and future careers. Currently we have extensive lists of careers related to English, social studies, mathematics, science, foreign languages, home economics, business, and so forth. We are concentrating on the acquisition of printed and audio-visual materials related to these subject areas.

Gradually more and more of our teachers are keying in on these resources and using them as introductory units to their courses. I do not see our program reaching peak effectiveness until most of our teachers understand, utilize, and connect with our career awareness program. To be successful career education must become a school-wide concern and endeavor.

Summary

We recognized a need to increase counseling resource materials related to self-knowledge, careers, and educational or training programs leading to careers. In order to store these materials, establish a clearinghouse for all counseling activities, and provide an area large enough for group dissemination of information, a modern Counseling Center was created. Programs and projects have greatly increased student research skills and knowledge. As a result, individual counseling sessions are no longer rudimentary and repetitious, but deal in depth with factor analysis, discussion of options, and decision-making. Greater efficiency has created the time to know students better and to counsel them more effectively.